

Why are Dispensationalists So Interested in Prophecy?

The reputation of traditional dispensationalism finds itself oftentimes wrapped up in its famous prophecy charts which give the panorama of the ages. At one level, this is understandable. Traditional dispensationalism has shared all of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith with other Bible-believing evangelicals. The place where differences shine more easily are in those eschatology charts! So the question begs to be asked. Why do dispensationalists seem to spend more time than other evangelicals on prophetic concerns or eschatology? Also, in doing so, are other doctrines short-changed in the process?

Hopefully, the answer to that question comes from more than psychoanalysis of the tradition's compulsive behavior. My interest in this question goes back to an important paper delivered by Todd Mangum at the Evangelical Theological Society in 1999 entitled "Why Dispensationalists Are So Obsessed With Eschatology: A Historical and Sociological Analysis." Mangum as a progressive dispensationalist would naturally view the interest in eschatology as an obsession on the part of traditional dispensationalists. Progressives have as one of their goals the elevation of the present age along with a more optimistic view (as they perceive it) of what can be accomplished for God. They view traditionalists as too pessimistic about the present age. Indeed, they would view many traditionalists as being too future-minded to be presently good.

Mangum suggests that most of the reckless sensationalism of the present time comes from dispensational ranks, which underscores the obsession with prophecy coming out of those circles.¹ To be sure, as a traditional dispensationalist, I have spoken against sensationalism in different forums such as the Evangelical Theological Society, Conservative Theological Society and the Pre-Trib Study Group. However, one should not be surprised to see this state of affairs since premillennialism has dominated the evangelical world for the last one hundred years. As a result, amillennial and postmillennial date-setting would naturally be more minimal. Nonetheless, such examples do exist. Dispensational sensationalists have been joined in recent times by amillennial date-setters² and postmillennial Christian Reconstructionists who sensationalized Y2K.³ Dispensationalists would not want others to point fingers at our sensationalists any more than amillennialists and postmillennialists would want us to point to theirs.

Mangum's sincere study highlights the obsession with prophecy in many ways, but one particular point of note is the debate between traditionalists and progressives over the issue of whether Jesus is today reigning on the throne of David. Mangum calls this debate a "relatively obscure point in dispensationalist eschatology."⁴ In this way, he diminishes the divide between the two camps and considers the distinction, at least this one, just a minor point. The upshot of this kind of approach is wrapped up in an attempt to get dispensationalists to quit putting as much weight on prophetic and

¹ R. Todd Mangum, "Why Dispensationalists Are So Obsessed with Eschatology: A Historical and Sociological Analysis," (Boston: The National Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 1999), 1. I am unaware if Mangum's paper has been published.

² Harold Camping, seemingly from an amillennial perspective, at one time predicted the end of the world in 1994 (*1994? [New York: Vantage Press, 1992]*). Recently he has published another prediction that the end of the world will come in 2011 (*Time Has an End: A Biblical History of the World 11,013 BC – 2011 AD [New York: Vantage Press, 2005]*).

³ I have in mind here Gary North, the Christian Reconstruction economist who joined the hysteria about Y2K that would make any dispensational sensationalist proud (www.garynorth.com). Back at the time I wrote a response; see Mike Stallard, "Y2K: Mass Hysteria or Prophetic Event," http://faculty.bbc.edu/mstallard/Biblical_Studies/Computers/y2k.doc; Internet; accessed 28 July 2005.

⁴ Mangum, "Why Dispensationalists Are So Obsessed with Eschatology," 3.

eschatological conclusions. In my comments below I am not really interacting with Mangum's article except at a surface level at times. I do have some differences as well as agreements with his historical and sociological analysis.⁵ However, I am using his article primarily to jump start my thought processes with the idea that he raised about the focus of traditional dispensationalism. Thus, without endorsing newspaper exegesis but being a good dispensationalist, my presentation will highlight *seven* good reasons that dispensationalists focus on prophecy and eschatology.⁶

The Sheer Volume of Biblical Prophecy

Actually, the problem with sensationalists is not precisely a focus on Bible prophecy. It is a mapping of biblical prophecy to current events. In other words, it is the *wrong use* of Bible prophecy that comes to the surface. Dispensational premillennialists are futurists because of their literal interpretation. They actually abandon this futurism when they act like historicists and place fulfillment of end-time prophecy in the present (usually involving events related to the coming tribulation). At best, the present time is the possible set up for the end-time days. When the end-time days get here, we will know for sure.

However, a dispensationalist who practices genuine futurism should not be discouraged from focusing appropriately on prophecy and living with great hope and expectancy. In fact, one of the reasons he spends much time on a study of prophecy is that it fills almost one-fourth of the entire Bible.⁷ As Pentecost notes, "Because of its prominence in Scripture it is only natural that much should have been written on the subject."⁸ Walvoord's general exposition of a thousand prophetic passages in one volume shows the magnitude of choices when studying this body of biblical literature.⁹ Problems have occurred because individual assertions about prophecy have been made (such as date-setting) which have been made out of harmony with the whole of the Bible. As stated earlier, the difficulty does not lie in the focus on prophecy per se. Dispensationalists choose not to ignore or downplay one-fourth of the entire Bible.

⁵ My agreements about history would be in his understanding of two types of fundamentalism (Niagara and Presbyterian as he labels them) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Mangum, 8). However, I do not think he places enough emphasis on amillennialism as the reason that the Second Coming is de-emphasized in the list of fundamentals on the Presbyterian side. Amillennialism is the position of least interest in eschatology. Mangum is right that this should not be understood as a denial of the Second Coming. It is simply a denial of that this particular doctrine is one of the fundamentalists of the faith especially as to details. Another point of potential agreement comes from his understanding that versions of literal interpretation at that time are partly indebted to Scottish Common Sense Realism. While stating correctly that this was particularly true of Reformed theological conservatives, Mangum invokes this relative to the rising misunderstandings about literal interpretation in that day across the board. This approach has been used consistently by progressive dispensationalists to voice the opinion that dispensationalists of that time lacked historical sophistication in expressing their views on literal interpretation. In my judgment, too much emphasis has been placed on the little studied thesis of Theodore Dwight Bozeman (*Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* [Chapel Hill, NC: University Press, 1977]). In an unpublished study Mark Snoberger has concluded that this thesis must largely be limited to the Reformed group and not used to paint a picture of evangelicalism in general, including rising dispensationalists ("Common Sense Realism: A Stimulus for the Origin of American Dispensationalism?") Snoberger's article will be part of an upcoming book I am editing to be published by Kregel (Mike Stallard, *The History of Dispensationalism*).

⁶ My own analysis of where we have missed the mark must await another time.

⁷ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), vii. The figure that 25% of the Bible was prophetic when it was written is often stated in dispensational circles. I have never seen it disputed.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ John F. Walvoord, *Every Prophecy of the Bible* (Reprint ed., Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1999).

Admittedly, this great volume of prophetic teaching is not all about end-time events such as the tribulation, Second Coming, and the eschatological kingdom. However, the interconnectedness of areas of theology show that prophetic passages relative to the end-time days fit within a larger scheme of God's overall plan. In the history of dispensationalism, this has been called the panorama of the ages or the picture of the biblical purposes of God in history. Oftentimes it is presented through the lens of the various dispensations. These dispensations culminate in the final kingdom age and demonstrate that history is going somewhere. Thus, the eschatological kingdom age is seen from this angle as a part within a whole. Dispensationalists have not ignored the other parts, but they have exercised some excitement about their place within the flow of God's work leading up to the final stages of the divine plan: "One of the distinctives of biblical Christianity is that God knows and reveals the future (Isaiah 46:8-11). Only God can do that. Thus, the future is settled, and not open to change... We can have confidence that God will continue to carry out His plan for the ages, and we who are Christians have a significant part in that plan."¹⁰ Later discussions will show further how eschatology is intertwined with all biblical teaching.

In terms of specific details, one can make the inductive observation that there are 318 references to the doctrine of the Second Coming located within the 216 chapters of the New Testament books or one out of every thirty verses. In addition, 23 of the 27 New Testament books teach the Second Coming.¹¹ This doctrine will also be shown below to be a major factor in understanding the present and not just the future. In light of its significance and frequent mention, the dispensationalist is correct in giving it due attention. In the end, the reason that dispensationalists focus on prophecy is because it deserves it.

Prophecy and Hermeneutics

Another reason that dispensationalists seem to focus on eschatology is the fact that this area of theological formulation quickly reveals one's overall approach to interpreting the Bible. At the least, one's consistency in following grammatical-historical interpretation comes to the forefront when prophetic passages are in view. Ryrie had summarized this for us quite well forty years ago.¹² I know that continuation of this kind of thinking is not popular or within the mainstream of current evangelical discussions about hermeneutics. It is also disregarded by progressive dispensationalists who are more interested in staying close to developments in mainstream evangelicalism and biblical studies at large.

However, many traditional dispensationalists still see value to Ryrie's insights and are not in a rush to jettison them. Assuming that this focus is right, prophetic material in the Bible becomes a major key for understanding how a genuine literal hermeneutic works itself out throughout the entire Bible.¹³ Another way to say it is to ask if a certain interpreter is literal in his understanding of prophecies in the Bible. The answer to that question goes a long way to seeing if he is following a consistent trajectory in his interpretation.

Let me give an illustration. In the announcement of the virgin birth to Mary, we see the dialog between the angel Gabriel and the young girl in Luke 1:30-35:

¹⁰ Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting the End Times* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹² Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 45-46, 86-109.

¹³ I am using the term literal interpretation to refer to grammatical-historical interpretation in general and not as the opposite of figurative when looking at a particular figure of speech. This *sensus literalis* has a long use in the history of the church and has become a technical term in the field of hermeneutics. Even nondispensationalists have grudgingly asserted that it has some historical warrant to refer to the goal of grammatical-historical interpretation (Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 84-85).

³⁰And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. ³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; ³³and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end.” ³⁴And Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin? ³⁵And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you: and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God.”

In virtually all evangelical interpretations the following elements are taken in a straight-forward way (we would say literally) from this passage:

- Mary would have a baby
- Mary would remain a virgin
- The name of Jesus would be given to the child
- Jesus would be called *Son of God*
- The power of the Holy Spirit would come upon Mary to produce the Christ child in a miracle

All of these features would be common interpretation following a grammatical-historical approach. However, in the same set of verses, intertwined with the elements listed above, notice elements in the text that many nondispensationalists do not take literally:

- God will give Jesus the throne of David
- Jesus will reign over the house of Jacob forever
- The nature of Jesus’ kingdom

How are these taken? Generally, nondispensational approaches tend to treat the throne of David as a heavenly throne, the house of Jacob as having no national dimensions, and Jesus’ kingdom being a spiritual one and not a concrete, earthly, ethnic, and politically based one. Mary would not have understood any of these things. Some might suggest that Mary did not understand the virgin birth either. However, it is not the virgin birth per se that is questioned by the young girl; it is how God is going to accomplish it. In the end, there is a de-Judaizing of the text to remove its Jewish elements which is nothing more than a spiritualizing or allegorizing of the text. But what is the rationale for doing this within these verses? An interpreter can not pick and choose what he wants to be literal and what is figurative when there is no evidence of a figure of speech or extended metaphor.¹⁴ To do so is inconsistency at its best. One of the reasons that dispensationalists focus on prophecy is that its interpretation almost becomes a barometer by which one’s overall approach to the text can be stabilized.

¹⁴ For a negative evaluation of current developments in evangelical interpretation of prophecy, see Robert Thomas, “The *New* Interpretation of Bible Prophecy” in *The Gathering Storm* edited by Mal Couch (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2005), 27-53. On the other side, for a presentation in agreement with many ongoing developments within evangelical interpretations of prophecy, see D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002).

Israelology

One of the most important reasons that dispensationalists talk about eschatology so much is the fact that this is the area of theology that usually deals with biblical information about the nation of Israel. There has typically been no category of Israelology in our dispensational systematic theologies to reflect this emphasis. On the other hand, there has always been the category of ecclesiology. In light of the distinction between Israel and the Church, perhaps the new category needs to be used more frequently to highlight the uniqueness of Israel as it appears in the Bible and dispensational representations of the Bible. It is possible that the absence of the category is owed to tradition which is heavily conditioned by amillennialism which dominated church history from the third century until the days of the Reformation.

An inductive analysis of biblical references to Israel reveals the strategic role which the nation plays in the plot line of the Bible. This is true even in the New Testament, but overwhelmingly so in the Old Testament. By way of comparison, note the following information:

Word(s)	Old Testament	New Testament
Israel	2510	73
Salvation or saved or save	258	141
Deliverance or delivered	362	43
Justification or justified or justify	14	34
Death	315	150
Life	341	214
Church	0	112
Gospel	0	101
Kingdom	214	163
Covenant	284	37

The above table shows the English usage of various words in the New American Standard 1995 update edition.¹⁵ Every occurrence would have to be examined on its own contextual merits. A final, thorough understanding of word usage would require a study based upon Greek and Hebrew words as well as many other terms along with concepts and the context of large passages.¹⁶ However, even at this simple level the truth can be seen. The word *Israel* is one of the most frequent words in the Bible. The dispensationalist therefore points out this major role for Israel. The focus on Israel usually given in traditional dispensationalism is heightened by the belief in a strong distinction between Israel and the Church. If Israel is not the Church, it stands on its own as a separate category. Where is the category discussed in dispensational theology? It is found in eschatology, the study of last things.

Israel is not all there is to eschatology. In fact, it has nothing to do with individual eschatology, the study of concepts like heaven, hell, the intermediate state, resurrection, and individual judgment. However, general eschatology which deals with such questions as the rapture, tribulation, millennium and eternal state is tied intricately with God's promises to the nation of Israel. General eschatology does not just deal with end-time events but includes the entire scope of biblical history that builds up to them. For example, kingdom teaching begins with the Genesis text (1:26-28) and includes all of the

¹⁵ Libronix software was used to search for these terms.

¹⁶ For example, to study the idea of kingdom would require the study of all of the set of words such as kingdom, king, prince, ruler, rule, dominion, reign, etc. We would also have to look at the word *Jews* and related terms by way of comparison to the word *Israel* which might increase the numbers for references to the nation.

major biblical covenants such as the Abrahamic (Gen. 12, 15, 17), Davidic (2 Sam. 7, Ps. 89), and New Covenants (Jer. 31, Eze. 36). It includes God's plan for the nation of Israel from its inception throughout the Old Testament record and into New Testament times. In my seminary class on dispensational premillennialism we spend hours going over kingdom promises in the Old and New Testaments. In the light of all of this, it is quite impossible to limit the study of prophecy to just a few parts of Scripture like Daniel, Revelation, and the Olivet Discourse. Therefore, the dispensationalist's "obsession" with prophecy or end-time events is really framed within a much larger context than some realize. This larger context makes it more reasonable that dispensationalists would indeed focus on prophecy the way that they do.

As suggested earlier, such realities as these concerning the nation of Israel in Scripture has led some dispensationalists to conclude that our systematic theologies need to include a major segment and category of Israelology. Fruchtenbaum refers to Israelology as the "missing link" of systematic theology.¹⁷ He comments, "In all Systematic Theologies, what exists of Israelology will only be partially developed. In Covenant Theology, the development will be minimal. In Dispensationalism, Israelology is only fully developed in its future aspect, not in its past and present aspects."¹⁸ While my own approach to dispensationalism is not guilty of the charge (at least that is my opinion), it is true that we sometimes focus on the future aspects to the exclusion of others (remember Mangum's criticism).¹⁹ However, I think that may be less than we think if we exclude the sensationalists from consideration.

Overall, Fruchtenbaum's concern is not misplaced. He comments, "Logically, Israelology must come prior to Ecclesiology and follow the same development. Both are a people of God but, historically, Israel precedes the Church. As Ecclesiology has been developed in its past, present, and future aspects, so must Israelology be. Only then will Systematic Theology be truly complete."²⁰ I would suggest that only dispensationalism among the various approaches would even allow for such a development. Until now, however, dispensationalists focus on eschatology and prophecy because that is currently the area that deals with national Israel, a major theme within the Holy Scriptures.

Present Optimism Based on Prophetic Hope

One teaching that is usually accepted today as conventional wisdom among evangelicals is the inaugurated form of the Davidic kingdom.²¹ Moore summarizes this development succinctly in the following words:

¹⁷ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Revised ed., Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1992).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ That the modern nation of Israel receives the attention of dispensationalists is not in question. It is not true, however, that it is modern Israel that drives the theological formulations. Dispensational theology was well entrenched within evangelicalism prior to 1948 and was even blossoming well before the advent of modern Zionism. For a discussion of modern Israel's relationship to dispensationalism see Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friends* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). At times, Weber too strongly castigates the dispensational movement, so his historical analysis needs to be critically evaluated.

²⁰ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 10. For an historical analysis of the development of replacement theology which led to the removal of national Israel as a category in Christian theology, see Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel and the Church: The Origin and Effects of Replacement Theology* (Reprint ed., Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2004). See also Mike Stallard, "The Rediscovery of the Jewish Perspective of the Bible" in *The Gathering Storm* edited by Mal Couch (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2005), 57-71.

²¹ Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

A coherent Kingdom theology has emerged within the two primary theological streams of conservative American Protestantism—Reformed theology and dispensationalism. Reformed theology is now taking seriously the earthly, material aspects of redemption, articulating a more biblical understanding of the Christian hope as cosmic transformation. The leading dispensationalist theologians no longer speak of the church as a “parenthesis” in the plan of God. They no longer sharply divide between God’s purposes for the church. Evangelicals of virtually all traditions now recognize the Kingdom revealed in Scripture is both “already” realized in the present era and “not yet” with a consummation yet to come.²²

In other words, according to this thinking we are already in the Messianic kingdom although it is not the final form of that kingdom. One particular implication of this teaching is that an understanding of Jesus’ kingdom authority presently mediated through the Church has a greater capacity for addressing social evils at the individual and structural levels of human existence than does the future focus of traditional dispensationalism.²³ I am not sure that previous forms of the inaugurated kingdom, which have been abundant throughout the history of the Church, have a track record of social engagement that is much superior to twentieth-century traditional dispensationalism.²⁴

However, that specific debate is not my concern here. Rather, I want to ask a simple question. What is the primary message the New Testament gives to those believers who are oppressed? To bring it home with a practical and timely example, can we mention the recent Chinese pastors and Christians who were arrested by the authorities for their faith?²⁵ What is the first thing that we say to them? In particular, do we involve ourselves in social engagement (an attempt to aid them in some concrete form through pressure on the Chinese government)? No dispensationalist of any stripe that I know would normally refuse to help them in concrete ways as the opportunity arises. Furthermore, certainly we can say there is no more important example of the need of social engagement than meeting the needs of the oppressed. It can also be said that my example is narrow. I am not looking at the world in general or the population at large. I am focusing on the oppression of believers. Nonetheless, I believe my example will serve to show that it is God’s heart and mind in the matter that helps the dispensationalist to invoke a future perspective for this particular issue. We cannot understate the matter if the Bible really points down this path.

With that in mind, I want to go to exegetical information in the New Testament which points in the direction of the Second Coming as the first message of hope to oppressed believers. This was a starting point for both Peter and Paul.²⁶ In I Peter, the great apostle focused on the issue of persecution and suffering by believers.²⁷ To those who were enduring mistreatment (1:6-7), Peter offered the hope of the coming inheritance in Christ (1:4), which would be activated or “revealed in the last time” (1:5). Peter encouraged Christians to bear their trials “tested by fire” with the hope of reward and honor at the “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:7). Peter is strong-minded and clear. His basic message to

²² Russell D. Moore, “Moving Forward with a Kingdom Consensus,” *Book Report 3* (Spring 2005): 2.

²³ Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 23-24. See also Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993), 285-91.

²⁴ I am primarily thinking of the amillennialism of Roman Catholicism when I make this statement.

²⁵ The Voice of the Martyrs reported that ten pastors were arrested during a baptism service somewhere in Sui County, Hunan province on July 1, 2005; as reported at World Net Daily, July 27, 2005; http://worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=45460; Internet; accessed 29 July 2005.

²⁶ The rest of the next three paragraphs is taken directly from Mike Stallard, “An Essentialist Response to Robert A. Pyne’s ‘The New Man in an Immoral Society: Expectations Between the Times,’” (San Jose: The National Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 1996). I have never published my response.

²⁷ It is also evident in these texts that the biblical writers ground the hope of believers in light of present persecution in their present position in Christ. Presentations of this will vary. However, it is common sense that any future hope brought by the Second Coming will only apply to those who have already been placed in relationship to Jesus.

mistreated Christians was “Gird your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope **completely** on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:13). Hence, he could say “to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation” (4:13). The sharing of the sufferings of Christ means also the partaking of the “glory that is to be revealed” (5:1) and elders were expected to look to the Second Coming as their ultimate reward (5:4). Peter’s final message appears to be a repeat of his opening exhortation to find encouragement in the midst of suffering based upon future hope in Christ: “And after you have suffered for a little, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (5:10).

Paul follows the same general outline in 2 Thessalonians. The occasion of the epistle is the persecution suffered by the Thessalonian Christians. Paul did not focus on any present inauguration of the Messianic kingdom but to the Second Coming of Christ as the great hope and motivation for their present situation: “For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed – for our testimony to you was believed” (1:6-10).

Now this is not to say that Peter and Paul do not address other concerns even in these epistles. However, it is to show that, at least for Christians who were being oppressed for who they were, the first point of the sermon is the Second Coming of Christ. This focus has been common in traditional dispensationalism. If such emphasis leaves a theological loophole for social disengagement in the present age, then so does the teaching of Peter and Paul. As we discuss the issue of how best to express the character of the present age and any empowerment available to us to better the lot of those around us, we must do so without demeaning the great hope we have in the Second Coming of Christ. In fact, it is safe to say that prophetic hope for the Christian is perhaps the primary basis for present endurance and optimism.²⁸

Our Hope for Tomorrow

Not only should dispensationalists focus on present hope in light of tomorrow’s promise, the content of our future prospects has value, both practical and theological, in and of itself. In other words, the value of God’s promises for tomorrow is not just for the effect those promises have on us today. Their greatest value will be recognized when we actually see the Lord and enjoy what He has promised. Do you think that Jesus Christ is pleased when we are looking forward to His coming? Did not Paul praise the Corinthians, the Philippians, and the Thessalonians because they looked forward eagerly to that day? (1 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 1:10) Did not Paul teach that the coming of the Lord will be a time when “each man’s praise will come to him from God”? (1 Cor. 4:5) Is not the hope of the resurrection, the great victory over death in the greatest reversal of all time, associated with His coming? (1 Cor. 15:23-26; 50-57). Is there any specific reason that Paul writes the exclamation “Maranatha!”—Lord come!—immediately after the statement, “If any one does not love the Lord, let him be accursed”? Is not our joy in the people we win to Christ at its greatest when we see Jesus? (1

²⁸ See also 1 John 3:1-3 shows clearly that a future focus actually provides one motivation for holy living in the present time. One could also look at the related doctrine of rewards which ties future expectation to present behavior for the Christian (e.g., Dan. 12:3; 1 Cor. 3:12-15).

Thess. 2:19-20) Will not the time of His coming be the first time we will experience absolute purity? (1 Thess. 3:13) Is not the time of the rapture, the grand reunion of all those in Christ? (1 Thess. 4:13-18) Does not His coming lead to our ultimate destiny? (1 Thess. 5:9) Is not the Second Coming of Christ the time when He will be glorified in His saints and us in Him? (2 Thess. 1:10-12) Will not His coming be the appearance of the “great God and Savior”? (Titus 2:13) Is not the Second Coming a public demonstration that God’s judgments are righteous and true? (Rev. 19:2) Is there anything greater than the public vindication of God and His saints?

I could, of course, continue the list of questions with obvious answers for quite a while. Here I have only focused on passages that deal with either the pre-trib rapture or Christ’s Second Coming to earth. I have not even addressed questions about the glorious kingdom that is ours in days ahead. Is it wrong to think on such things? Absolutely not! God is pleased when we do. Far from thinking about them too much, I believe Christians in our churches do not think about them enough. I am not accusing Mangum and those like him of saying that we should not think about these things. I would also hasten quickly to add that God is also pleased when we give a cup of cold water to someone today. It is simply my judgment that dispensationalists, all sensationalists aside, are bringing an added balance to the presentation of evangelical truth by their focus on the promises for tomorrow which God brings.

I would like to finish this section by highlighting my favorite verse in the entire Bible: “And He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” (Rev. 21:4) This promise is fulfilled at the end of the millennium and as the eternal state begins. It is associated with the full presence of the triune God which even surpasses the presence of the incarnate Christ during the millennium (Rev. 21:3, 22). I think about this verse virtually every day. Am I wrong? Does it turn me into the kind of believer that does nothing good in the present? I will let others decide, but I doubt that such a conclusion could be drawn. Further, does it cause my theological system to be out of balance? I doubt it. In the end, there is a quality about many end-time prophecies in the Bible that magnifies the nature of God and His delights which He has prepared for His children.

The Supernatural Nature of the Bible

Years ago, as a young pastor, I invited John Walvoord to speak to my congregation. I took the great dispensationalist out for lunch afterwards partly to say thank you, but also to badger him with questions about theology. In our discussion I finally asked him this question: “What is the greatest issue facing dispensationalism today?” His answer, without hesitation was the following: “It is what it has always been, the inerrancy of the Bible.” What he meant was the literal hermeneutic followed by dispensationalists was the only approach which allows the Bible to be harmonized properly so that its inerrancy could be fully established. This fit well with earlier statements by Walvoord to the effect that one can be a liberal and be an amillennialist and perhaps a postmillennialist. However, it is impossible to be a liberal and at the same time a dispensational premillennialist. In fact, Walvoord said, “premillennialism is a stubborn obstacle to liberal theology.”²⁹

At least part of Walvoord’s view stems from dispensationalism’s attempt to let distinctions stand throughout the Bible so as not to produce a false and forced unity. The debate between the able, amillennial scholar Oswald T. Allis and the venerable, dispensationalist Lewis Sperry Chafer sixty years ago highlighted this particular perspective. Commenting on this controversy, Fuller notes: “It is

²⁹ John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 15. For his full discussion of the various millennial views and liberalism, see pages 3-17.

evident that Allis and Chafer did not differ over some triviality or technicality in theology. Rather, they differed over the nature of the Bible's unity--a question which is second in importance only to that of the truth of Scripture. Both men were deeply committed proponents of the truth of Scripture, but each felt that the way the other viewed the Bible as a unity seriously threatened its truth."³⁰ Thus, many traditional dispensationalists have believed that the nature of the Bible as an inerrant text is demonstrated by a dispensational approach to its interpretation. At this point, we have to ask whether this relates to prophecy or eschatology in any way.

The answer to that question can be illustrated from the writings of Arno C. Gaebelin, one of the associate editors of the Old Scofield Reference Bible. Gaebelin complained in the early twentieth century that "the professing church almost completely ignores or neglects the study of prophecy, resulting in the loss of one of the most powerful weapons against infidelity."³¹ The dispensationalist goes on to state the major significance of prophecy, "If prophecy were intelligently studied, such a denial could not flourish as it does, for the fulfilled predictions of the Bible give the clearest and most conclusive evidence that the Bible is the revelation of God."³²

Gaebelin then rehearses the usual lists of Bible prophecies that have already been fulfilled, especially those that are messianic prophecies, predictions about Israel, or prophecies about the nations. These are common in dispensational presentations even today. His fascination appears to be with predictions about Israel. While discussing Deuteronomy 28 and other passages, he comments about the Jews, the enigma of history: "What human mind could have foreseen that this particular people, dwelling in a special land, was to be scattered among the nations, suffer there as no other nation ever suffered, and yet be kept and thus marked out still as the covenant people of the God whose gifts and callings are without repentance? Here indeed is an argument for the Word of God which no infidel can answer."³³

Such a focus runs counter to much of church history. Christians beginning in the late second and third centuries began to move away from seeing any significance to the passages giving predictions about the nation of Israel, especially any positive ones. Could it be that the Christians of the ensuing Middle Ages looked at their version of Rand McNally maps and did not see Israel and as a result opted for replacement theology? Dispensationalists see the degrading of Israel's promises and the accompanying allegorical interpretation as a wrong turn in history which robbed the Bible of a powerful argument for its supernatural character. In this light, it is quite interesting that the debate over the date of the book of Daniel, one of the major prophetic books in the biblical record, revolves largely around whether God can and does pre-write history.³⁴

The Glory of God

One of Ryrie's most misunderstood teachings is what he called the doxological unifying theme or principle of the Bible.³⁵ He is responding to the unifying theme of individual redemption through

³⁰ Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 25-26.

³¹ Arno C. Gaebelin, "Fulfilled Prophecy a Potent Argument for the Bible" in *The Fundamentals* edited by R. A. Torrey, updated by Charles L. Feinberg (Reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), 205.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 208.

³⁴ See Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 33-34.

³⁵ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 46-47, 98-105. Sometimes I call this the doxological purpose to biblical history. I do not believe Ryrie would disagree with me in light of his use of the expression *purpose of God in the world* (46). Even traditional dispensationalists shy away from this part of Ryrie's sine qua non. I believe this owes more to ignorance and misunderstanding than to serious consideration of what is being said.

election that is found in covenant theology. Ryrie does not deny the truth of the doctrine of individual redemption through election. He is suggesting that it does not serve well as an integrating principle for the entire Bible. Instead, a multi-track approach functions better in that role because it highlights that God is doing more than individual redemption in the world all to His glory. Covenant theology can not handle this well especially since it has little distinction between Israel and the Church.

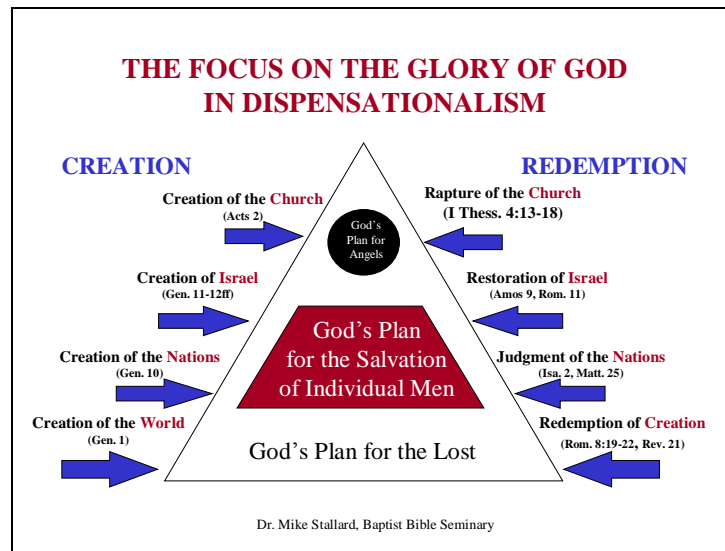
The doxological purpose to biblical history cannot be said to be a new insight on the part of Ryrie although the way it was expressed might be unique to him. Furthermore, one can also note the special historical context of debate with covenant theology that framed the discussion. However, the dispensationalists of the Niagara and Scofield eras talked much more frequently about the biblical purposes of God (the plural for purposes is important) than dispensationalists in Ryrie's day and certainly by comparison with today's dispensationalists.

Gaebelein can serve once again as a representative. He taught throughout his ministry that against the backdrop of the hopelessness of the present age stand the blessed hope of the rapture of the Church, the hope of the national restoration of Israel, the hope of the nations, and the hope of the renewal of creation.³⁶ This longed for consummation of prophetic hope, however, was not just an end-time gambit on Gaebelein's part. The entire discussion was framed within God's work in the world throughout *all* of biblical history. Thus, traditional dispensationalists have correctly focused on prophecy relative to this point, not simply because it is the grand finale, but because it brings the final piece of the puzzle so that the overall picture of God's glory is now complete.³⁷ As a result, the dispensationalist can better give God his due. I often use the diagram below in my classes to walk students through this complicated issue.³⁸

³⁶ Arno C. Gaebelen lays out his views in "The Coming of the Lord, the Hope of Israel, and the Hope of the Nations and Creation," *Our Hope* 8 (September 1901): 194-99 and *The Hope of the Ages* (New York: Publication Office "Our Hope," 1938). I have surveyed and analyzed Gaebelein's presentation in Michael D. Stallard, *The Early Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelein* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2002) and Mike Stallard, "Prophetic Hope in the Writings of Arno C. Gaebelein: A Possible Demonstration of the Doxological Purpose of Biblical History," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 2 (Fall 1998): 190-211.

³⁷ Another way to say this is that the panorama of the ages is not just prophecy. My guess is that some critics of dispensationalism see the charts of the panorama of the ages and only think eschatology or end-time events. However, this is an extremely incomplete picture. The charts of the panorama of the ages which are such a public and frequent picture for dispensationalists are a picture of *all* of biblical history.

³⁸ Please do not read anything into my use of a triangle. It does not refer to the Trinity or any New Age mysticism! I am not a member of the Trilateral Commission and this is not a presentation of the eye of the Illuminati! The triangle is simply a visual device which helps me to frame the inverse order in history by which God begins the last stages of fulfillment for the listed institutions.



In closing our discussion on doxology, it must be said that, apart from the sensationalists who are setting dates and overstating other facets of prophecy, traditional dispensationalists, while loving prophecy and eschatology, have approached these things with the big picture in mind. The Conservative Theological Society is essentially a traditional dispensational study group. While this year we are focusing on things to come, in the past we have focused on other topics such as hermeneutics. Last's year discussion about creationism is especially enlightening about our interests. As dispensationalists who have strong opinions about eschatology or the study of last things, we were willing to talk seriously about protology, a study of first things. I have never expected less from our movement. We are truly interested in all of theology.

Conclusion

Do traditional dispensationalists concentrate on prophecy and eschatology too much? Sometimes we do, especially those extreme sensationalists among us. However, in general, it is not a fair criticism to suggest, apart from the sensationalists, that dispensationalists live too much in the future. It must be remembered that our charts on the panorama of the ages give just that, a panorama that covers more than the last days. Furthermore, we have seen that prophecy helps to measure our interpretation skills. Beyond this, the nation of Israel has a staggering place in divine revelation. In dispensational versions of systematic theology, we have covered that in our eschatology. Our present lives are impacted by a focus on prophecy in a positive way and the future state which God predicts for us has significance in its own right. A focus on fulfilled prophecy actually leads to positive centering on the supernatural nature of the Bible as the Word of the living God. Finally, prophecy helps us to focus on the glory of God as the multiple facets of God's work in history come together to demonstrate ultimate fulfillment. Christians are already citizens of the coming kingdom even though that kingdom has not yet arrived. We must live *now* in light of that truth. However, it would not be a bad thing if every day we look eagerly to the sky and pray, "Even so, come Lord Jesus."